Strategies for the Intergenerational Workplace

by Kate Kirkpatrick, Steve Martin, Sandi Warneke

As if the world weren't complicated enough—the fact that four distinct American generations are at work adds further challenge to the workplace productivity equation. Veterans, Boomers, Generation X and Millennials are in the workforce side by side...but not necessarily in sync.

Gensler's research and project experience indicates that while the four generations bring drastically different influences and expectations to work, understanding the areas of common ground is what will allow employers to develop high performance workplace strategies. The answer isn't a custom workplace for each group, but an integrated system of environment, tools and policies that brings out the best in every generation.

Generational issues aren't the only issues of significance in the workplace, but they are significant. By taking the time to understand where each generation is coming from and how their influences affect behavior, businesses can anticipate continued changes and evolve their workplaces in a way that enhances their competitive position.

What if we had four generations in the workplace?

The struggle to understand and balance the diverse concerns and values of the four generational cohorts reaches from C-level executives to leaders in human resources, IT, marketing, real estate, facilities and every other corporate function. Key to determining how we create a work environment that successfully bridges generational diversity and resulting work styles is an understanding of the dynamics of each generation.

Leading generational experts Claire Raines, Ron Zemke and Bob Filipczak defined the four modern U.S. generations in their well-known book "Generations At Work:"
  • Veterans (b. 1920-1942)
  • Baby Boomers (b. 1943-1960)
  • Generation X (b. 1961-1979)
  • Millennials (1980-2000)

They note that "there is a growing realization that the gulf of misunderstanding and resentment between older, not so old and younger employees in the workplace is growing and problematic." An online focus group conducted by Gensler in 2005 uncovered a wide range of positive and negative attitudes about generational issues from people from their 20s to their 60s. (Selected comments are included throughout this paper.)

"The old school generation has a tendency to work longer hours...we feel we are expendable regardless of title or how good we are. We are very driven."

"The younger generation thinks they know it all and have a difficult time communicating with the team. Usually they are plugged in listening to music and not absorbing a lot of information that is pertinent to a project."

"I have had a computer since I was six years old—some people have worked here since before there were computers."

"With multiple generations you get the benefits of an older, more experienced generation as well as the youth's knowledge of the current technology and trends. In a way they complement each other. "

"I really like feeling that I'm working for someone I respect and who respects my work. My older colleagues don't care

"whether our clients do useful work or have integrity."

"It seems to me that the younger set has an "enjoying" factor that may be lacking in those who are older."

"It's difficult for different generations to work together...it can affect how work is distributed and how each person's contributions are viewed. With an open mind and good communication, I think generational differences can be worked out to make the workplace a more productive and comfortable place."

It's a mix of compliments, conflicts, and missed opportunities—but still evidence that people do want to learn from and connect with each other. They're just not sure how to do so.

Essentially, the influencing events and people, values, ambitions and priorities of the generations are in conflict. From Raines, et al: "These four generations have unique work ethics, different perspective on work, distinct and preferred ways of managing and being managed, idiosyncratic styles, and unique ways of viewing such work-world issues as quality, service and, well, just showing up for work."

Who are the generations?

The generations can typically be defined through the following timelines, influencing factors and resulting behavioral trends.

Veterans "The Greatest Generation" brings a traditional, heroic attitude to work. This oldest workplace generation (b. 1920-1943) is practical, respectful and accustomed to hierarchical leadership. They are a reliable and steadfast presence, but somewhat uncomfortable with the wild blender of technology and age/gender/ethnic diversity in today's workplace.

Baby Boomers The 80 million children of the post WWII era are typically driven and optimistic—and perhaps somewhat self-centered. They grew up the center of attention and enjoyed the thrilling progress

of television, the space age and modern suburbia. While they carry over some of the Veterans' duty-driven work habits, they were also the originators of collaborative work and consensus-based leadership. They're cautiously pro-technology and interested in helping younger generations learn, but can be frustrated by what looks to them like a less ambitious approach to work.

Generation X Just 46 million people born between 1964-1979, this group is influenced by sweeping social change and sandwiched between the optimism of the post-WWII generation and the complexity of a globalized world. Often the children of divorce, they grew up self-reliant and not nearly as trusting as the Boomers. Their tendency to be skeptical and anti-personal commitment may be what garnered them the term "slacker;" however, given work that is meaningful to them, colleagues they respect, and a schedule with work-life balance, they are a highly creative and productive group.

Millennials This group of 76 million young people starting their careers have lived with unprecedented economic prosperity and the optimistic influence of "make the world a better place" Boomers like Bill Clinton and Oprah Winfrey. Raised by parents determined to provide them the best, they are smart and sophisticated yet keep very close ties to their parents as they enter the work force. This generation has digital DNA and only knows the world with DVDs, iPods, wireless access, multiple cell phone families and homework done over the web. After years in play groups and organized after-school activities, they are natural collaborators and even date in groups. September 11th was a monumental event that introduced this generation to the idea that the world is indeed complex, and will continue to play out as they grow older.

Making generational diversity a business asset

While much is known about the major influencers and attributes of the four generations in today's workforce, what to do

For the millennial and X generations, work has little to do with where you are at any given moment.

Left: Helping casual interactions happen between different generations builds collegiality and supports a learning organization.

with this information remains in question by many organizations.

In his book "Get 'Em While They're Hot," college administrator Dr. Tony Zeiss notes that "For American business, the challenge is urgent. National prosperity and the success of individual organizations will rest with our collective ability to learn to respect diversity, encourage innovation and entrepreneurship, and attract, develop and retain peak performing workers.

Any organization can cut costs, consolidate business units and outsource non-core functions. Many organizations can launch memorable marketing campaigns or form strategic alliances. But with innovation, creativity, agility and speed-to-market more important than ever, the people talent of an organization is the only unique leverage that it has to be successful.

If those people come to work with inherent barriers to achieving maximum success, however, a company is unable to gain the full benefit of this unique assets.

Therefore, recognizing and responding to the issues of the multi-generational workforce is an essential competitive issue. Reality seems to dictate that organizations need to not simply acknowledge generational diversity, but to develop a work environment where it is viewed and managed as a corporate asset.

With other factors such as salary, benefits and opportunities being roughly equal, Dr. Zeiss asserts that a company's workplace strategy, including tools, environment and policies, could be a factor in attracting and retaining the best people and most effectively deploying their talents.

Jim Goodnight, CEO of SAS, the world's largest privately held software maker, is well known for believing that his biggest corporate assets walk out the door every evening. Goodnight's strategy for making sure they keep walking back in is to offer schedule flexibility, a contribution-driven culture and generous amenities. The company doesn't hide from the reason

why they focus so much on employees: it's just good business sense. "If employees are happy, they make customers happy. They make customers happy, they make me happy," says Goodnight. "Creativity is important and whatever I can do to get creative juices flowing here, I'll do it."

SAS has never had a losing year or a layoff, and sees turnover of just 3% (compared to an industry average of 20%) in a workforce of over 9,000. Stanford University business professor Jeffrey Pfeffer estimates that SAS's approach to building employee productivity adds $80 million to their bottom line every year. What if other employers could create the same kind of environment, focusing on their employees' well-being in part by helping multiple generations work together in harmony?

What different generations want from work

To create an inter-generationally friendly environment, we need to understand the generations' different expectations in the workplace, from their career aspirations to teamwork, leadership, work tools and, ultimately, what makes them walk back in the door every day.

Attitude about work Veterans don't really even consider what their personal feelings might be on the subject of work; duty and obligation overrule personal ambitions. The Boomers absorbed that sense of duty but added a focus on achievement and advancement, resulting in their "live to work" attitude that results in long hours and family sacrifices.

"I am often amazed at the attitude of many of our employees who set their own schedules and do not seem to grasp the team concept..." —Gensler focus group

Perhaps as a result of the strain and family splits caused by those sacrifices, Generation X believes that "work to live" is the way to go. They do not want to be tied to a desk, let alone an employer. Millennials also work to live, particularly because they

are interested in outside pursuits in their communities. This attitudinal shift from duty to achievement to work as a means to more important ends is a fundamental difference between the generations seen throughout our research.

Attitude about careers Some people can recount their grandfather or father's retirement and the gold watch or equivalent that came with their lifetime of commitment. The Veterans were possibly the last generation to experience that kind of career longevity.

Thanks to corporate layoffs, early retirement, downsizing or simply a desire for change, many Boomers are in a second or third career. And numerous surveys point out that the Boomer group sees work as a lifetime pursuit:

- Half of Boomer workers say they envision working into their 70s and beyond; two in five prefer a phased retirement (AARP)
- 2/3 of people expect to do paid work after age 60 (Employee Benefit Research Institute)
- 67% will work to stay mentally active, 57% to stay physically active (Merrill Lynch)

Reports of the mass retirement of the Boomers, the oldest of whom are just now in their early 60s, may be greatly exaggerated. However, due to the sheer size of this generation, any form of retirement will tighten the pool of qualified U.S. knowledge workers and put a strain on organizations unless they can offer options for Boomers to stay in the workforce in a rewarding way.

Generation X's "free agent" mentality takes them where they can find the work-life balance, mutual respect and meaningful work that they crave. Millennials trend to a similar openness to moving jobs as needed to find personal satisfaction.

Leadership For a Veteran, leadership means hierarchy and order. They expected to be told what to do, or to tell others, and assumed that if they were still employed, they were doing a fine job. Boomers evolved command-and-control to a more consensus-based model and originated the concept of performance reviews. How am I doing? What am I achieving? These and more soul-searching questions characterize the Boomer leadership style.

In contrast, Generation X is thoroughly uninterested in giving or taking "because I said so" leadership. This group gives respect based on merit and isn't willing to extend it simply because of title. As leaders, they tend to the informal and collaborative, an extreme example of which was the dot-com days when the tail end of Generation X became CEOs with big dreams of changing the world in caffeine and chaos-laden workspaces.

Millennials, even with their confidence and sophistication, are still eager for mentoring from older colleagues and want instant feedback about their work.

Collaboration The buzzword of business today is something that a Veteran might puzzle at. With few exceptions, the job of a team was to follow the leader. In contrast, Boomers, Xers and Millennials are strong collaborators, each better than the preceding group. Plain and simple, this is

Below: Personalizing a work area can be a reflection of generational attitudes... what's on your wall?
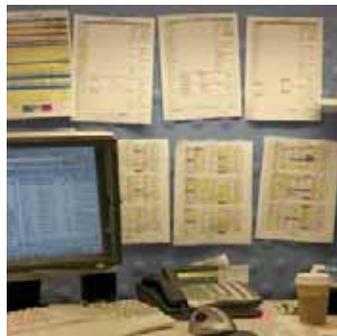
a characteristic that increases in value and skill with each generation.

Technology For the Millennials, a technology-infused life is the same as breathing. Generation X is also comfortable with this work tool and expects it to be provided as a

facilitator of the kind of schedule that they'd like to keep. Boomers know that technology is a given of the workplace but often see it as a necessary evil. It's just one more thing to manage! Not surprisingly, the technology explosion of today is well beyond what Veterans had in their workplaces, and it can be a struggle for many of them to fully utilize digital technology tools.

In Gensler's focus group, technology was the most frequent wedge between generations, causing frustration from older workers who wish younger colleagues would unplug, and eye-rolling from young people who see the discomfort of their senior co-workers as an unwillingness to catch up. This is a productivity issue in more ways than just putting tools to use.

"The more time we spend with our PCs and other technology tools, the less real time we spend with people. Our people skills are on the decline: presenting, teaming, brainstorming, mentoring...building relationships."—Gensler focus group

What matters? As time goes by, financial and other compensation benefits are of great importance to Veterans and Boomers; health insurance is expensive and many people at this age are caring for aging parents and their children at the same time. Generation X and Millennials value an ability to work the way they want to, and are able to do this through their tech savvy. But for all of the generations, one thing is clear: they want to contribute and be part of an endeavor with meaning to them. Each of the generations wants to do to something that matters.

The Veterans rallied around World War II like no generation since has rallied around any one thing. The Boomer, Xer and Millennial search for significance in their career pursuits may well be a result of the lack of a larger unifying force in their lives. Po Bronson's book "What Should I Do With My Life?" was not a bestseller without reason— its tales of people from their 20s to their 70s trying to find life fulfillment resonated with millions of people who wonder whether they are spending their relatively short lifetime doing anything worth doing.

Boomers are re-evaluating their driven work ethic as they assess their remaining years in the workforce. The balance that Xers seek is directed toward their families and friend networks. And the Millennials, with strong values of community-mindedness and compassion, are looking for integrity in the workplace and work that makes a contribution. Substance is important to people and organizations have a tremendous opportunity to connect their people to it.

The meaning of "place" A workplace environment has important associations for each generation. For a Veteran, the workplace communicated status and accomplishment—how big is your office?

How high is your floor? Boomers didn't abandon this model completely, but evolved workplaces to include more openness and features that suited their needs for consensus-building and collaboration.

"Work areas of the younger generation are usually decorated with very expressive, personal images and mementos. Work areas of the older generation are usually decorated with more functional items or items that suggest work accomplishments (an award, a nametag from an event they attended)" —Gensler focus group

Generation X wants to increase the amount of collaborative space at work and is particularly put off by the hierarchy and barriers implied by enclosed offices; however, they will often ask for a quiet enclosed place for solo work and sometimes find it outside the office, causing Boomers to wonder where they've gone. Millennials exemplify the "work anywhere" phenomenon, with an ability to shift the place and time of work to whenever and wherever it suits them best.

"Creativity happens in several places and at several times, not only at my desk or during the work day. I change place and move around a lot…"

"I understand the workday as the opportunity to connect with my team, almost as a home base. Otherwise it is most effective for me to make my workplace anywhere 24/7. This enhances my quality of life outside of work and results in more time spent with my family." —Gensler focus group

Finding common ground

Veterans cautious of a much-changed workplace and eager to share what they know; Boomers trying to make an impact and stay relevant; Generation X seeking balance and meritocracy; Millennials starting careers and wanting to be valued—what could there be in common among these different people and all the things they want from their work?

The generations find their common ground in five core areas where each group has priorities or where there is a significant wedge issue that can be addressed through workplace strategy and design:

- Meaningful work
- Collaboration
- Learning
- Technology
- Flexibility

The generations might have different points of view on what is meaningful, how they like to collaborate, and the kind of learning they seek, but they tend to agree

Left: A Boomer workplace might have more open space and team areas, but offices stayed on the better window real estate and didn't always have a view to the inside.

Right: A totally Generation X-driven workplace wanted to get rid of all hierarchy and barriers—and used the money they saved on better technology.

Supported by technology, Millennials are comfortable working in multiple settings. But they don't want to abandon the collaborative work model that they truly value.

on the importance of the first three areas; organizations should seek to strengthen these through workplace strategy.

In the case of technology and flexibility, there are significant expectation and capability gaps that create division; with these issues, organizations should try to create connections that help reduce the gaps.

"We seem to keep laying over the young (who are agile, casual, and connected) a workplace from the past that is fixed, formal, and separating. Will a failure to reshape and energize our places of work yield organizations that cannot attract, motivate and renew?"—Gensler focus group

Meaningful work Regardless of the reason, all of the generations value the opportunity to contribute to their organizations and want to be part of an organization where something of value is happening. For some individuals, this will take on a "save the world" flavor, while for others, it is enough that services or products are created with pride and quality.

Companies that illuminate the larger purpose of their work and their commitment to core values will go a long way to align and motivate all of the generations in their workplaces.

One good example of how this extends into the workplace is global energy company BP. The goal of every real estate project that they take on, and the drive behind their workplace policies, is to fulfill their core

values of Great People, Expert Solutions and Sustainable Future. The design strategies that they pursue must directly relate to each of these values.

In an experimental project called bp WOW!, the company used a 10,000 sf office as a living laboratory to explore, test, measure and then roll out bp's next generation of office space. A key to the project was the company's expectation that some of the ideas would fail; in fact, they wanted to have a certain level of failure because it meant that they were pushing their own boundaries.

Gensler's objectives were to create different work clusters to support task-based, team-based and "nomad" work styles; provide flexible settings to find how much and what kind of space people need to be effective; investigate technology and building operations functionality; incorporate sustainable design; and manifest the bp brand in the work environment.
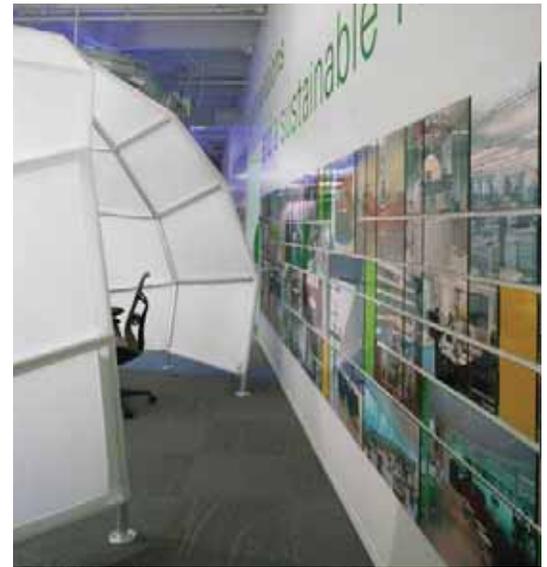
Interactive work sessions with BP leaders, end users and partner vendors to explore the possibilities of a new work environment led to the design of different work neighborhoods reflecting user-specific work styles, each linked to a central Global Café space. Each neighborhood has furniture selections and configurations, panel heights, finishes and accessory packages specific to the work cluster's needs. Collaboration spaces throughout the space test different levels of acoustical/visual privacy, collaboration styles and flexibility.

The space plan makes it challenging to go from one neighborhood to another without entering the Global Café, increasing opportunities for impromptu discussions between groups.

Toward BP's ideal of sustainable design, an innovative 8" raised floor, under-floor air, ceiling removal, new lighting technologies and sustainable products provided bp an opportunity to express their sustainable values and save energy costs.

Environmental graphics enliven the bp WOW! space and are a key component in communicating company brand and values through the workplace.

On many levels, the BP initiative is admirable, but it is particularly notable as an example of aligning workplace strategy with core values, clearly communicating to employees that the company stands behind the words on its annual reports.

Collaboration & Learning What is collaboration? It's a large meeting of people at a conference table with one person joining by phone. It's a team meeting in a manager's office. It's someone turning to the person at the workstation next to them and asking "what do you think of this...?" It's the preferred mode of work for nearly all of the generations.

Collaboration and learning are closely intertwined subjects, since adult learning is primarily experiential and therefore the

process of producing work collaboratively is a learning experience. To distinguish the two, we will define learning as the occasions when information is formally or informally imparted with the intention of being used throughout the work experience rather than on a project-specific basis.

Gensler's research uncovered an interesting paradox about learning: the older generations complain that the younger "think they know it all" while the younger lament the older generation's unavailability

or perceived lack of interest in teaching. Providing better interactive environments would help people see that there are learners looking for teachers and vice versa. The right planning approach and collaboration/gathering places can allow for mentoring and the transference of knowledge from generation to generation.

From the real estate perspective, a challenge for formal learning spaces is their degree of flexibility for other uses and the ease of changing technology as needed. Research by furniture company Steelcase has indicated that most collaboration takes place in groups of two or three people, suggesting that solutions come in the form of moveable furniture or thoughtful space planning rather than simply allocating large amounts of space.

Supporting collaboration and learning among the generations is primarily a matter of creating as many possible ways for people to gather together, formally and otherwise. Easier said than done? Read the following success stories that provide helpful illustrations of how very different industries can employ their workplaces in support of collaboration and learning that bridge generational gaps.

Schottenstein, Zox & Dunn A successful regional law firm based in Ohio, Schottenstein's collaborative service model is a celebrated differentiator for them. After 40 years in a building near the state capital, the firm chose to move to a redeveloping neighborhood and made some innovative workplace strategy moves, which included:

• Single-size 150 sf attorney offices
• Planning approach that mixes practice groups
• Central conference center with wireless network for client convenience
• Best real estate dedicated to new cafe/ bar where clients, staff mix

Features like a top-floor bar/café with an outdoor terrace make a statement about how SZD's attorneys and staff are valued equally and also how these additions are expected to help them perform more efficiently. The recruiting impact has been a 50% increase in acceptances over the previous year and zero partner defections in the wake of what could be seen as radical change in an industry that prefers the incremental to the revolutionary.

As explained by one of the firm's younger partners: "This space says "we're all important here" whether you are younger or older, experienced or not, and that makes you feel differently about your responsibilities."

Allen & Overy UK law firm Allen & Overy also saw collaboration and learning as critical issues for their firm and landed on "intelligent productivity" as the core value of an innovative work environment that would differentiate them in the competitive quest for staff and clients.

Inspired by the concept, Gensler created a space that erases the distinctions of where and when work happens. Quiet places for meditation or prayer acknowledge an ethnically diverse attorney population, and a mix of highly changeable formal and informal lounge, training and conference spaces let teams work with each other and clients in multiple ways.

Community spaces, rather than offices, are on the windows to enjoy the great views of London. The fully wireless office and support of firm leadership for the concept means that no matter where you are, you really can be working, an issue that many companies have had to overcome when implementing casual work areas.

Allen & Overy experimented with totally open work areas for practice groups, mixing associates, partners, secretaries and paralegals to build interaction and learning. Enclosed offices remain for practice groups who weren't ready to go quite that far.
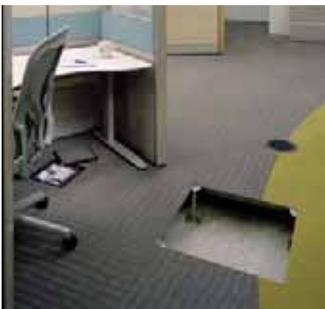
The firm's new workplace shakes up traditional law firm office design because the firm believes it must accomodate evolving expectations from the top talent and top clients they are working to bring to the firm.

Discovery Communications At Discovery Communications' global headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland, the issues of collaboration and formal/informal learning were paramount. Discovery wants its teams to maximize both creativity and speed, and so their workplace design features:

- Three personal workspace size standards that fit all Discovery employees
- Reduced office sizes to push meetings into community areas
- Small, intermittently placed private spaces to do quiet work
- Environmental graphics enliven channel identification and company values
- Expansive conference center mixed with informal spaces to maximize learning

"If you have an environment where people like to work, you're increasing your likelihood of success. [Our headquarters] expresses above all the value we place on our employees."

——Discovery executive

Discovery opted not to have a cafeteria at their 600,000 sf building because they want their people to be out in the redeveloping Silver Spring community, supporting the businesses that have re-emerged due to Discovery's choice to locate there. Their new headquarters is a highly effective real estate investment in part due to flexibility designed into the building for the long term, but mostly because the workplace strategy centers on the ability of Discovery's people to interact and be productive.

Deloitte For consulting firms like Deloitte, learning can be a difficult proposition because of heavy staff travel. When Gensler worked with the firm to redesign offices around the U.S., connection to people, culture, and learning were essential workplace strategy principles.

The big idea for each Deloitte location was to create a democratic space by re-appropriating space from individuals to the group and making those spaces the most flexible and appealing places to be.

- Reduced/standardized office sizes, moved to interior, added glass fronts
- All open office furniture totally moveable
- Hoteling space with concierge service to personalize each before arrival
- Added cafes at critical circulation points

Deloitte's accounting and tax practices have largely adopted these ideals as well, but have kept more closed offices, acknowledging the greater level of individual concentration work performed in the office, in contrast with consultants who come back to the office primarily for team-based work.

Building Bridges:
Technology & Flexibility

With mobile voice and data capabilities a given for today's workforce, people can accomplish a great deal outside an office. But technology is a divisive force between generations, as we've noted previously. And the ease of making connections at any

Allen & Overy's space is guided by "intelligent productivity." With every setting given the right tools and comfort for different activities, every setting can be host to productive solo or collaborative work, such as their multiple collaborative spaces (top left). The firm has also experimented with totally open seating for attorney practice groups.

time or place creates a pace of information sharing and decision making that can simply be overwhelming. (A field known as interruption science has emerged to study how human behavior is affected by the interruptions of email and other technology.) Gensler integrates technology tools into workplaces every day and finds that learning and interaction among people is really the best way to bridge the technology gap. By making older workers more comfortable with asking for assistance, or by providing the training they crave, by encouraging younger workers to share their expertise and by facilitating that important sense of shared purpose and value, the technology barrier can be reduced.

But what about the mobile workforce? How does a team collaborate when half of them are working from, well, anywhere but the office?

Multiple media outlets have written about an initiative by electronics retailer Best Buy called ROWE (Results-Oriented Work Environment) that allows headquarters employees work when and where they want. Entire departments sign on at once to avoid confusion, and get technology tools that they need to stay connected. They also use simple whiteboards and sticky notes to communicate who's in or out and how to contact them.

After three years, the company measured a 13% productivity increase and captured the loyalty of staff whose lives have been changed by their new ability to see their families and pursue outside interests. "People in the baby boomer generation realize what they gave up to get ahead in the workplace," said one manager. "[Now] they realize it doesn't have to be that way."

The power of great places for every generation

While generational integration was not a direct goal of these projects, their success is due in part to how well they support the needs and preferences of the different ages and related life situations of these employers' most valuable asset: their people.

Perhaps a vital underlying message is that if an organization cares about people in the first place, and chooses to show it through their workplace strategy, they successfully bridge the generations before they even realize it.

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